

# *Blanca Wetlands ACEC Expansion and Grazing Plan*

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## **What is Blanca Wetlands?**

Blanca Wetlands is 10,000 acres of land managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The area is part of a wetlands network of playa lakes, ponds, marshes and wet meadows. It is all that remains of a wetlands ecosystem that once covered the desert scrub within the closed basin of the San Luis Valley. Today, many of the historic wetlands are dry because of increased competing demands for both surface and groundwater. The BLM and its partners have made strides in preserving and managing the wetlands environment at Blanca Wetlands to provide rich and diverse habitats for wildlife and a haven for people.

## **What is an ACEC?**

Blanca Wetlands has been designated an Area of Critical Environmental Concern, or an ACEC. This BLM designation is based on an area's unique, rare or sensitive resources. Blanca was designated an ACEC specifically for its recreation and wetland values, including playa and marsh habitats containing large populations of water birds, amphibians, macroinvertebrates, and 13 threatened, endangered, and sensitive species.

## **Why expand the ACEC?**

BLM has initiated studies with state, local and other federal partners over the last decade. These studies suggest that large-scale management efforts across ownership boundaries, could mimic natural ecological processes and provide greater management flexibility to meet the purposes of the ACEC.

This research also suggested a need to create connectivity from Blanca Wetlands north to allow less mobile species the ability to disperse. This irrigated connection would allow wetland species to move freely between larger environments and help to restore key wetland habitats native to the area. Such restoration would require easements, acquisitions, or other efforts with willing landowners. This ACEC expansion will provide an opportunity for BLM to work with willing land owners to acquire parcels important for wetland connectivity or restoration efforts, potentially benefitting more than 160 bird species, 5 species of amphibians, and threatened and endangered species.

## **How will the expansion work?**

Before any actions are taken, the BLM's San Luis Valley Field Office will prepare an Environmental Assessment (EA). This EA will analyze a proposal to expand the ACEC to include adjacent lands that share the ACEC values and characteristics. The BLM will analyze a range of alternatives from leaving the ACEC the size it is, to various levels of enlargement up to the size of the project area boundary. The BLM will use comments from the public to help design these alternatives.

## **What is an Environmental Assessment (EA)?**

An EA is a public document that a federal agency prepares under the National Environmental Policy Act. The document analyzes whether a proposed agency action would require preparation of an environmental impact statement (EIS) or a finding of no significant impact.

## **Will this expansion affect private lands?**

If an alternative is chosen that includes private lands within the new ACEC boundary, BLM will have no jurisdiction on those private lands. Any actions initiated with a private landowner is strictly voluntary and at the

landowner's willingness to participate. Should a private land owner within the designated ACEC ever choose to sell those lands, and if funds are available, BLM may purchase them if the parcels provide wetland values consistent with the purposes of the ACEC. Additionally, the ACEC designation might encourage other organizations to work with willing private land owners within this boundary on conservation easement opportunities.

**Is BLM expanding the use of their water rights?**

The water BLM currently uses to irrigate the wetlands comes from a variety of sources, including groundwater rights held by BLM, mitigation water from the Closed Basin Project, and short-term water supplies provided by other sources, such as Colorado Parks and Wildlife and private entities. Before BLM could use its water rights to irrigate new areas, the action would have to be approved by the Colorado water court and Colorado Division of Water Resources, which will ensure that there is no expansion of use of the water rights.

**How can the public participate in this process?**

The public can be most influential in this process by submitting comments in writing by March 16, 2012 to the following address:

Blanca ACEC  
Bureau of Land Management  
Attn: Jill Lucero  
15571 County Rd. T.5  
La Jara, CO. 81140

Comments may also be submitted via e-mail at: [BLM\\_CO\\_SLVPLC\\_COMMENTS@blm.gov](mailto:BLM_CO_SLVPLC_COMMENTS@blm.gov)

The public is invited to attend an open house on February 29, 2012 from 4-7pm at the SLV Regional Medical Center Education and Conference Center (east of Grizzly Inn) at 1919 Main St., Alamosa, CO.

BLM welcomes all comments and recommendations; however, comments that address the size of the ACEC, the configuration of the ACEC, grazing within Lakes, Dry Lakes, or Blanca allotments, and resource considerations within the boundary, will offer the most useful input in designing alternatives and considering possible effects.

**Will my comments be made public?**

Public comments received will be available for public review at the U.S. Forest Service/BLM Office in La Jara, CO. Because comments are available for public review, please do not include any personally identifying information such as phone number or address that you do not want made available.